



## Building up eParticipatory decision-making from the local to the global scale. Study case at the European Higher Education Area



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### ABSTRACT

The social systems developed in the context of globalisation are further more complex than those arisen within the rule-of-law of the nation-states. The local, national and international relations impose into these social systems different force fields determining the space of possibilities in which they evolve. In this situation, the decision-making is correspondingly further more complex as to drive democratic participation from the root-level of individual members and stakeholders, all the way through until the global system. eParticipation represents a possibility to make it possible determined by the member perceptions of partaking in relevant decisions.

A paradigmatic example of these globalised social structures is the European Higher Education System, in which very well defined local and national structures coexist with a normative field of globalised relations. Between 2010 and 2013 an eParticipation system was developed under EU support involving a significant number of universities from Europe and abroad. A flexible approach was used to adapt the system to the different contexts, whereas an analytical framework was set up to evaluate the experience in order to find guidance for future eParticipation developments. The socio-technical and analytical frameworks and the corresponding results are discussed aiming to propose a new architecture for eParticipation. This solution targets the challenges of the 21st century University in which the crossroads of learning analytics, eAdministration and eParticipation are deeply re-structuring the academic environment.

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### 1. Introduction

*"If we would set up a long-lived form of government, let us not even dream of making it eternal. If we are to succeed, we must not attempt the impossible, or flatter ourselves that we are endowing the work of man with a stability of which human conditions do not permit."* (Rousseau, 1913: III, 11)

The society in which Rousseau had direct experience was not so different from the Greek polis in which the people involved could discuss face-to-face the issues arisen in a rather culturally homogeneous society. The early development of the optical telegraph at the end of the 18th century was regarded by some visionary as the possibility to realise Rousseau's democratic model at the scale of a large nation-state as France (Mattelart, 2003). It is needless to

argue that the slowness of such rudimentary telegraph – not so different from ancient precursors – was not appropriate to deploy the required deliberative stage at such large scale. Nonetheless a brand new socio-political organisation – not determined by these communication means – was dawning with the form of representative democracy. Some 140 years later, the possibility of deploying a real participatory democracy at large geographical scale was again envisioned hand in hand with new telecommunication means (Mumford, 1934).

Such means have made possible the globalisation as a kind of political-economic integration in which the world is becoming a kind of cultural melting pot far away from democratic archetypes. In this context, social organisations evolve in a field of forces in which international relations constitutes not only border conditions but also a space of possibilities and threats in which the social system may satisfy its needs and solve its issues (Dahrendorf, 2001). Each level of interaction (local, national and international) is determined by different rules and actors and impose further conditions to the other levels. This situation puzzles the individual

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called to participate in issues and opportunities here and there, being only able to gaze a rather superficial perception from all these issues (Zimmermann, 2012). On the other hand, common problems are separately tackled with significant strength loses because stakeholders do not find the stage in which the issue could be more easily coped by aggregation of strengths.

Undoubtedly the information technologies offers a new kind of ubiquitous interaction that introduces a breadth of new interplay possibilities into the social game (Álvarez Álvarez, 2012; Díez Gutiérrez, 2012a,b; Marcelo, 2012; Zimmermann & Díaz Nafría, 2012). Whether we manage to use them to boost a transparent and participatory democracy or to strengthen a surveillance and dominant order (as we have observed in the Snowden case) is probably a matter of strategy we have to devise cautiously (Díaz Nafría, 2011; Fleissner, 2012; Fuchs, 2014; Macaskill & Dance, 2013; Susha & Grönlund, 2012).

A university constitutes in itself a rather sophisticated social system in which the deploying of proper participatory democratic processes is a challenge due to its inherent heterogeneity. Nevertheless, the well-defined set of rules of traditional universities simplified significantly the social game within the institutions. Such scenario has been dramatically overwhelmed by the international rules and markets imposing important changes into the ruling of the universities, which are being significantly commodified, with loss of some of their constitutive principles (Díez Gutiérrez, 2010; Verger, 2013). In the case of Europe, the previous system of autonomous entities who recognised each other under different national laws is becoming a supranational system in which European regulations coexist with national and local legal frameworks and funding mechanisms. To this respect, the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) constitutes a paradigm of complex social system in which participatory tendencies are confronted to the dissolving drifts of market rules. On the other hand, the possibility of erecting a transnational system in which either local, national or international matters could be effectively handle in a participatory manner, instead of being driven by dominant forces, is a challenge worth to be tackled (cf. Álvarez, Álvarez, Dominguez, & Kiczkowski, 2011).

This is in short the objective of the European project MyUniversity evaluated herewith with respect to its ability to build up eParticipation (eP) from the local to the global scale. This evaluation will additionally serve to find guidance as to improve the approach, following previous Rousseau's statement of considering the form of government provisional.

The case study, developed among 14 European universities during three years and involving 13 additional ones in the last period, represents a relevant case of Educational Decision Making at the crossroads of a 21st century University, in which learning analytics, eAdministration and eParticipation are deeply re-structuring the environment of Higher Education at the global scale (García Peñalvo, 2011; Verger, 2013). This environment represents opportunities as well as threats that must be properly tackled in order to boost better learning, more efficient administration and more democratic decision-making (Laviña Orueta & Mengual Pavón, 2008; Álvarez et al., 2011).

Furthermore, it is the emergence of a new university dynamic, more detached from face-to-face contexts, what imposes the necessity to explore social and democratic mechanisms capable to bring about an effective hybrid context of proper education, as well as scientific and cultural reproduction (Álvarez et al., 2011). In other words, if learners and teachers are going to be more than customers and service providers, hybrid learning and learning analytics are not enough to support the kind of human interaction able to deliver the basic university commitments with respect to education, science and civic culture (cf. Scott, 2006). To this respect, the possibility to discuss issues related to educational policy at

different levels of concern (from the disciplinary scale to international education matters) and to engage in the institution's life in a strong sense, thus participating in the decision making, must be blended into a participatory learning environment. On the other hand, it is the learning analytic technologies and methodologies deployed within the endeavour of the development of eLearning what provides insightful means to support eParticipation channels. In the final phase of MyUniversity project this merging – not initially conceived – was indeed explored and positively assessed for future guidance.

The paper is structured as follows: Section 2 covers the technical and socio-organisational solutions adopted by the experience carried out, as well as the analytical means used to gather and scrutinise achieved results. In Section 3 the problems concerning the achievement of genuine democratic processes in complex systems – as universities – are analysed, particularly with respect to globalisation, the role of ICTs and rising inequality. This contextualisation is set in order to derive conclusions beyond the case study properly and to find guidance for future work. Section 4 presents the results of the case study according to the analytical framework described in Section 2. Taking into account both the results shown in Section 4 and the contextual analysis of Section 3, e-Subsidiarity is then proposed in Section 5 as enhanced eP in higher education contexts covering from the local to the international levels. Finally, Section 6 presents conclusions including achieved results and lessons learnt, and proposing future working lines.

## 2. Material and methods

In order to achieve the objectives of developing participation in decision-making through electronic means at the EHEA and to subsequently assessing the achieved results to improve participation in such a complex scenario, particular care was taken to follow European and international guidelines and recommendations issued before the development of the project (CE, 2009; ITU, 2008; Millard et al., 2009; OECD, 2009). In addition, other normative research carried out in the field before and after was also observed (Álvarez et al., 2011; András, 2011; Bingham, Nabatchi, & O'Leary, 2005; Brown, 2005; Chadwick, 2003; Chrissafis & Rohen, 2010; ePractice, 2014; Galindo, 2006; Janssen & Kies, 2004; Participedia, 2013; Petrauskas, 2006; Sæbø, Rose, & Skiftenes Flak, 2008; for the detailed adopted guidelines, and their corresponding sources cf.: MyUniversity, 2011).

According to this guidance, it is of utmost important addressing the issue at different *analytical levels*: from the infrastructural grounds, related to the *resources* needed for the eParticipation deployment, to the highest level of the *general impacts* related to the societal objectives achieved, and including two intermediate levels, referred to *operational outputs* (coming out from the interaction with the eParticipation tools, thus immediately above the resources) and *outcomes* (concerning specific impacts on decision-making processes addressed during the eParticipation deployment) (Millard et al., 2009). Hence, the issue clearly overwhelms the technological approach and must be tackled in both a *technical* perspective and a *socio-organisational* perspective (Bingham, Nabatchi, & O'Leary, 2005; Álvarez et al., 2011) which can be analysed at the aforementioned levels with adequate evaluation models.

### 2.1. Project context

MyUniversity project was supported by the European Commission (EC) and a consortium of 14 universities (representing a population of 423,443 members) together with three research

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